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# MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES.

**Baltimore, November, 1901.**

*BEN JONSON'S INDEBTEDNESS TO  
THE GREEK CHARACTER-  
SKETCH.*

**THE purpose of this article is to point out the indebtedness of Ben Jonson to the post-classical character-sketch.**

This literary form has its origin in the *ἠθικοὶ Χαρακτήρες*, or *Ethical Characters*, of Theophrastus.<sup>1</sup> These characters in the form in which they have come down to us consist of thirty-seven short sketches. In all of them the method of treatment is precisely the same and is simplicity itself. It consists in defining a quality and then proceeding to enumerate the actions to be expected, under given conditions, from a man embodying that quality.

Just how much Jonson owed directly to Theophrastus it is, of course, impossible to say. The most that can be affirmed positively is that he was familiar with the work of Theophrastus. This is proved by a comparison of passages like the following. The first of these is an entry in the diary of Sir Politick Would-be:<sup>2</sup>

"A rat had gnawn my spur-leathers, notwithstanding I put on new and did go forth; but first I threw three beans over the threshold."

Likewise Theophrastus says of the *Superstitious Man*:

**"And if a weasel run across the road, he will not proceed till someone goes ahead of him ; or until he has thrown three stones across the road."**

Again in the first scene of the third act of the same play, Mosca speaks thus of flatterers :

“I mean not those that have your bare town art,  
 . . . . . nor those  
 With their court dog-tricks, that can fawn and flatter  
 Make their revenue out of legs and faces  
 Echo my lord, and lick away a moth.”

**This is evidently taken from the character of a flatterer in which Theophrastus says :**

**1** Born in Lesbos between 373 and 368 B. C., he was a pupil of Aristotle and afterwards became his successor as head of the Peripatetic School.

2 *Volpone*, Act. iv, sc. 1.

**"And saying such things, he will pluck from the mantle (of his patron) a bit of wool ; and if any speck of chaff has been blown by the wind upon his hair, he will pluck it off."**

It is not mainly by direct adaptations, however, that Jonson shows most clearly the influence of Theophrastus. He was much too original a worker to content himself with mere borrowing. Hence we find him amusing himself by writing character sketches of his own, quite in the Theophrastic manner. To the list of *dramatis personæ* of two of his plays, *Every Man out of his Humour* and *The New Inn*, he affixed short "characters of the persons," which, because each of the persons is the embodiment of some "humour," are, except for their brevity, exactly like those of Theophrastus.

Yet it was neither in his borrowings nor even in his imitations of Theophrastus that Jonson shows most clearly his indebtedness to the Greek character-sketch. This appears most evident in the use he made of a certain dramatic character-sketch written by Libanius, the Greek sophist of Antioch.<sup>3</sup> This character-sketch appears in the fourth volume of Reiske's edition of the works of Libanius under the title "A rhetorical declamation" on the subject "A morose man, who has married a talkative wife, denounces himself." Jonson's literary discernment is no where better shown than in his selection of this particular character-sketch for dramatic treatment. For, in distinction from those of Theophrastus, it is thoroughly dramatic in the same sense and to the same degree that Browning's *Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister* is dramatic. Both are dramatic monologues.

To show how closely Jonson followed his Greek original, I have placed side by side the

3 Libanius died near the end of the fourth century A. D. Classical and post-classical literature contain many examples of the writing of character-sketches—enough certainly to show that Theophrastus was not alone in his interest in it, that indeed the interest in character portrayal in and for itself is perennial and as universal as literature itself. Of these, the following are a few out of many that might be instanced: *Iliad*, Book xiii, lines 278 and following; Horace, Book i, *Satire ix*; Juvenal, *Satires* viii and x; Martial, Book iii, *Epigram on Cotilus*; *Auctor ad Herennium*, Book iv; Rutilius Rufus, *De Figuris Sententiarum et Elocutionis*, Book ii; Svesnius, *Epistle* civ.

corresponding passages from the Greek character sketch and from the two plays, *The Silent Woman* and *Volpone*, in which Jonson made use of it.<sup>4</sup>

In the description of Morose given in the dialogue between Clerimont and Truewit in the first scene of the first act of *The Silent Woman*, Jonson develops certain suggestions of Libanius as will be shown by a comparison of the following passages.

Truewit,

"They say he has been upon divers treaties with the fish-wives and orange-women, and articles propounded between them: marry the chimney-sweepers will not be drawn in."

Clerimont adds,

"No, nor the broom-men: they stand out stiffly. He cannot endure a costard monger, he swoons if he hears one."

Truewit continues,

"Methinks a smith would be ominous."

Clerimont,

"Or any hammer man. A brazier is not suffered to dwell in the parish, nor an armourer."

All this is clearly an adaptation of the following lines from Libanius:

"Moreover, I flee precipitately from the anvils and the hammers and the uproar of the work-shops, from the shops of the silversmiths, from the forge of the worker in iron—many others. But I welcome those crafts which are carried on in silence. And, verily, I have even seen painters who sang while they worked—so delightful is it to citizens to chatter and they cannot restrain themselves."<sup>5</sup>

Clerimont goes on:

"He turned away a man last week for having a pair of new shoes that creaked. And this fellow waits on him now in tennis-court socks, or slippers soled with wool."

Libanius makes *Δύσκολος* say:

"As long as I lived alone, I enjoyed silence enough, having trained my household servants never to do anything that would annoy me."<sup>6</sup>

Clerimont has heard that Morose vows to marry a woman who lodges in the next street

"who is exceedingly soft-spoken; thrifty of her speech; that spends but six words a day."

<sup>4</sup> Since the writings of Libanius have never been translated, even into Latin, I am obliged to present my own, doubtless imperfect, translation.

<sup>5</sup> Page 136, l. 12-18.

<sup>6</sup> Page 136, l. 18-20.

This is taken from the recommendation given to *Δύσκολος*

"Be of good courage, he said, she has trained herself in nothing so much as this, for sooner would you accuse stones of loquacity than this girl: so that I fear, he said, lest the charge may be made against her that she is more silent than is necessary."<sup>7</sup>

The suggestion for the first scene of the second act, in which Morose appears and asks his servant many questions, each of which is answered only by signs, was doubtless also the single line from Libanius in which *Δύσκολος* is made to say:

"Having trained my household servants never to do anything that would annoy me."<sup>8</sup>

It is to be observed that Epicæne begins to reveal her true character much sooner than does the silent woman in Libanius, for she remonstrates with Morose about sending away the parson,<sup>9</sup> whereas her prototype does not begin to talk till after the marriage is performed.<sup>10</sup>

When the wedding guests come in, headed by Daw with the Collegiate Ladies, Morose utters an exclamation of horror.

"O the sea breaks in upon me."<sup>11</sup> Another flood, an inundation! I shall be overwhelmed with noise."

This is evidently an echo of Libanius.

"Just as the sea overwhelms a ship, so the woman's tongue overwhelms me."<sup>12</sup>

The third act ends in a frightful uproar of drums, trumpets and the shouts of the guests, in the midst of which Morose runs out with a howl of disgust. This also seems to have been suggested by Libanius in the following passage, in which *Δύσκολος* describes his own wedding.

"For there was no moderation. There was a great clatter, violent laughter, unseemly dancing, a senseless wedding song . . . so that I was tempted to tear off my garland and run from the wedding."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Page 137, l. 6-9. <sup>8</sup> Page 136, l. 19. <sup>9</sup> Act iii, sc. 2.

<sup>10</sup> But this, in comparison with the coming conflict, was unbroken peace. For before midnight, a voice was heard complaining of the bed. Later she asked me if I was asleep . . . a third time she asked something, and a fourth. Page 137, l. 21-26.

<sup>11</sup> Act iii, sc. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Page 142, l. 22-23.

<sup>13</sup> Page 137, l. 12-18.

Truewit, commenting upon the tumult, says :

"The spitting, the coughing, the laughter, the neezing, . . . the dancing, noise of the music, . . . makes him think he has married a fury."

Here he uses the same expression as *Δύσκολος*, who speaks of his wife as *ταύτην τὴν ἔριννιν*.<sup>14</sup>

In the second scene of the fourth act, Morose, accompanied by Dauphine, enters, cursing the barber who had been the promoter of the marriage. In this passage Jonson seems to have had in mind the following lines :

"I await a cessation of the chattering, lamenting and cursing marriage, and him who first mentioned the woman to me."<sup>15</sup>

What follows is also from Libanius. Epicæne approaches Morose, saying :

"You are not well, sir; you look very ill: something has distempered you."

Such questions are among the grievances of *Δύσκολος* also. He says :

"But if she notices the groan, she assails me, asking, 'What goes amiss with you within?'"<sup>16</sup>

Truewit adds fuel to the flame of Morose's anger at what he regards as a senseless question, by affirming that these are "but notes of female kindness; certain tokens that she has a voice." This is almost an exact rendering of the consolation which *Δύσκολος* says he received under like circumstances.

"Verily, he said, this is a sign of love and a certain indication, at the same time, that she has a voice."<sup>17</sup>

Truewit considerably offers to entreat Epicæne to hold her peace, but Morose interposes with the despairing cry :

"O no, labor not to stop her. She is like a conduit pipe, that will gush out with more force when she opens again."

The comparison is taken from the speech of *Δύσκολος* where he says :

"For just as those inspectors of water-courses, when they take away the dike, make the flood worse . . ."<sup>18</sup>

Finally they decide that Morose is mad and Epicæne says compassionately,

<sup>14</sup> P. 137, l. 14-15.

<sup>15</sup> P. 140, l. 14-16.

<sup>17</sup> P. 138, l. 4-5.

<sup>16</sup> P. 140, l. 16-18.

<sup>18</sup> P. 146, l. 23-24.

"Sure he would do well enough if he could sleep."

To this Morose retorts,

"No I should do well enough if you could sleep. Have I no friend that will make her drunk, or give her a little laudanum or opium?"

The corresponding passage is,

"My wife is not drunk. Yet is this a terrible thing? For if she were drunk, she would sleep, and if she slept, she would perhaps be silent."<sup>19</sup>

Truewit continues the torture by replying,

"Why she talks ten times worse in her sleep."

Morose,

"How!"

Clerimont,

"Do you not know that, sir? Never ceases all night."

This, too, is from Libanius,

"But when she has exhausted every topic by the rush of her speech—the affairs of our own household, those of our neighbors and still nothing new appears, she tells me her dreams, inventing them, by the gods, as it seems to me, for she never sleeps, but often spends the night in talking."<sup>20</sup>

Both *Δύσκολος* and Morose canvass the possibilities of getting a divorce. The former rejects the project, preferring to die by a decree of the senate. Because into the senate chamber, while such a matter was under consideration, a woman might not enter, whereas she would have access to a court of justice granting a divorce.<sup>21</sup> Morose, on the contrary, welcomes the suggestion of an interview with a lawyer. It is interesting to observe that the caution of *Δύσκολος* is fully vindicated by the experience of Morose, for in the midst of his consultation with the pretended lawyer and parson, Epicæne enters, rampant. Yet before this, even in his attempt to see a lawyer, Morose has difficulty, as shown by his reply to Dauphine's solicitous inquiry whether he has yet seen a lawyer.

<sup>19</sup> P. 143, l. 8-10.

<sup>20</sup> P. 141, l. 11-16.

<sup>21</sup> For it is illegal for her to be present with those discussing a matter of life and death in the council. But if this were a divorce trial, and if it were necessary to explain to the judges in what way I am wronged, the court would be common to her and to me. Page 147, l. 14-18.

"O no!" he says, "there is such a noise in the court that they have frightened me home with more violence than I went. Such speaking and counter-speaking with their several voices of citations, appellations, allegations, certificates, attachments, interrogatories, references, convictions and afflictions indeed among the doctors and proctors, that the noise here is silence to 't, a kind of calm midnight."<sup>22</sup>

The speech is adapted from the following:

"I do not frequent the Assembly much, not because I am indifferent to matters affecting the common weal, but because of the shouts of the rhetoricians who cannot be silent. Nor am I accustomed to frequent the Agora, on account of those many names of legal processes, as *φάσις*, *ἐνδείξις*, *ἀπαγωγή*, *διαδικασία*, *γραφὴ*, *παράγραφη*, which they who have no business before the courts love to name. So-and-so has accused so-and-so of such and such things. What is this to you, who are neither prosecutor nor defendant."<sup>23</sup>

When Truewit brings in the pretended lawyer and parson, Morose refuses to salute them, giving as his reasons the following:

"Salute them! I had rather do anything than wear out time so unfruitfully, sir. I wonder how these common forms as *God save you*, and *You are welcome* are come to be a habit in our lives; or *I am glad to see you!* When I cannot see what the profit can be of these words, so long as it is no whit better with him whose affairs are sad and grievous, that he hears this salutation."<sup>24</sup>

This is a free rendering of the following lines:

"Verily I think we ought to drive out from the Agora this form of salutation which consists of greeting one with the word, Hail! a custom which has come into our life I know not whence. For I, by the gods, do not see the profit of the expression, since I have not heard that he whose circumstances were such as to call for grief was benefited by the salutation."<sup>25</sup>

A little farther on, Morose interrupts the wrangling of the pseudo-parson and lawyer to give some account of his former way of life.

"Nay good gentlemen," he says, "do not throw me into circumstances. Let your comforts arrive quickly at me, those that are. Be swift in affording me my peace, if so I shall hope any. I love not your court tumults. And that it be not strange to you, I will tell you: my father, in my education was wont to advise

me that I should always collect and retain my mind, not suffering it to flow loosely; that I should look to what things were necessary to the carriage of my life, and what not; embracing the one and eschewing the other: in short that I should endear myself to rest and avoid turmoil; which now is grown to another nature to me. So that I come not to your public pleadings, or your places of noise; not that I neglect those things that make for the dignity of the commonwealth, but for the mere avoiding of clamors and impertinences of orators that know not how to be silent."<sup>26</sup>

*Δύσκολος* says:

"My father, O Council, ever exhorted me to collect (*συνάγειν*) my mind and to keep it concentrated (*συνέχειν*) and not to allow it to wander (*διαχεῖσθαι*), to discern what things are essential in life and what not, and to hold fast to the one and to keep away from the other, to honor peace, to fly from tumults. These things, O Council, I have continued to do, not going often to the meetings of the Assembly, and this not through indifference to the commonweal, but because of the voices of the rhetoricians, who cannot be silent."<sup>27</sup>

Jonson seems to have been much interested in this character-sketch, for we find him using it again in another of his comedies—*Volpone*. In the second scene of the third act, Volpone, feigning illness, is visited by the loquacious Lady Politick Would-be. On seeing her enter, Volpone's first ejaculation is borrowed from Libanius:

Volpone's words are,

"The storm comes toward me."

The Greek is,

"But I tremble, seeing another flood (*ῥεῦμα*) coming toward me."<sup>28</sup>

Lady Politick has the habit of telling her dreams, a habit which Morose detests. When she starts to relate one of her dreams, Morose interrupts her with the words

"O, if you do love me  
No more: I sweat and suffer at the mention  
Of any dream."

The wife of *Δύσκολος* tried his patience in the same way, for we read:

"But when she has exhausted every topic by the rush of her speech . . . and nothing yet appears, she tells me her dreams, inventing them . . . as it seems to me, for she never sleeps."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Act v, sc. 1.

<sup>23</sup> P. 135, l. 26–p. 136, l. 7. The Greek words have no exact equivalents in English.

<sup>24</sup> Act v, sc. 1.

<sup>25</sup> P. 136, l. 7–12.

<sup>26</sup> Act v, sc. 1.

<sup>27</sup> P. 135, l. 21–p. 136, l. 2.

<sup>28</sup> P. 141, l. 11–15.

<sup>29</sup> P. 141, l. 11–15.

and again,

"I could not endure a talking dream."<sup>30</sup>

Interesting as an evidence of Jonson's learning, is his putting into the mouth of Volpone a reference to a saying of Archilochus, of which Jonson undoubtedly was reminded by a passage in Libanius.

Volpone says:

"Ah me I have ta'en a grasshopper by the wing."

The line which Jonson had in mind from Archilochus is,

*τέττιγα πτεροῦ εἴληφας*

The passage by which Jonson was reminded of this is as follows:

"It is fitting, I said to her, that you imitate the customs of the cicadas (*τέττιγων*) of whom only the male sings. Even he is annoying because he sings too much, but if the female sang too, you could not hear. But she, cutting in and taking the cue, said, 'These are the best cicadas, the friends of the muses, to whom talking is sweeter than to eat.'"<sup>31</sup>

Volpone, weary of her chatter, tries to silence her by remarking

"The poet . . . . .  
As old in time as Plato, and as knowing,  
Says that your highest female grace is silence."

This, too, is from Libanius:

"If you will not listen to me, I said, have regard to the wisest poet when he says:"

O woman, silence adorns women.<sup>32</sup>

Lady Politick, unabashed, takes the cue:

"Which of your poets? Plutarch, or Tasso, or Dante? Guarini? Ariosto? Aretine? Cieco di Hadria, I have read them all."

So of the wife of *Δύσκολος* it is said,

"But she said at once 'And who is this poet, and who was his father, and of what district was he, and when did he begin to write and how did he die?'"<sup>33</sup>

And again,

"But the mention of the chorus leaders causes her to speak of tragedies. Thereupon she pours forth a torrent of words relative to those who invented tragedy, mentioning also those who brought them out and in what manner the literary form grew and what each man contributed."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> P. 137, l. 5.                      <sup>31</sup> P. 146, l. 9-14.

<sup>32</sup> P. 145, l. 31. Libanius quoted the line from the *Ajax* of Sophocles, line 293.

<sup>33</sup> P. 146, l. 5-6.

<sup>34</sup> P. 141, l. 1-6.

"Alas," exclaims Volpone, "my mind's perturbed."

So *Δύσκολος*,

"I am not master of my mind. I suffer from dizziness, I suffer from vertigo."<sup>35</sup>

When Mosca enters, Volpone appeals to him for help,

"Oh,  
Rid me of this torture, quickly, there,  
My madam with the everlasting voice  
. . . . .  
. . . . . such a hail of words  
She has let fall."

The appeal of *Δύσκολος* to the senate is similar,

"Defend me for the sake of the gods, relieve me from the everlasting voice (*φωνῆς ἀπαύστου*) . . .<sup>36</sup> often struck as with hail (*χαλαζῇ*) I faint away."<sup>37</sup>

While Jonson's use of the Greek character-sketch is interesting as an instance of his indebtedness to the classics, its chief significance lies in the evidence thus afforded of the close relation that might exist between the drama and the character-sketch. This kinship Jonson was the first to recognize.<sup>38</sup> That he recognized it so readily was due in part to the analytic and expository quality of his mind, which led him to be interested more in the type than in the individual, and more in the exhibition than in the development of character. He saw that in spite of their apparently wide dissimilarity, the real difference between these two literary forms was mainly one of method in the character presentation. The drama presents character in action. The character-sketch portrays character in what may be called, with due apology, its statical relations. The former, by means of the counterplay of action upon action, makes the characters reveal themselves. The latter by setting forth the qualities or peculiarities which differentiate a type, shows characters fixed, statuesque, sepa-

<sup>35</sup> P. 142, l. 23-24.    <sup>36</sup> P. 141, l. 23.    <sup>37</sup> P. 143, l. 18-20.

<sup>38</sup> La Bruyère in the preface to his *Caractères, ou Les Mœurs de ce Siècle* (1688), speaking of Theophrastus says;

"Les savans, faisant attention à la diversité des mœurs qui y font trait es, et à la manière naïve dont tous les caractères y font exprimés; et la comparant d'ailleurs avec celle du poëte Ménandre, disciple de Théophraste, et qui servit ensuite de modèle à Térence, qu'on a dans nos jours si heureusement imité, ne peuvent s'empêcher de reconnaître dans ce petit ouvrage la première source de tout le comique." Page 5, edition of 1750.

rate from all that could lend them human interest. As a result of such limitations, the character-sketch was too often but a featureless and pale picture. It resembled the imaginary portraits that sprinkle the pages of such books as Lavater's,<sup>39</sup> in which every feature, eyes, ears, lips, brow, mouth are made to bear the same stamp.

Yet with all its manifest inferiority to the drama as a vital form of character presentation, the English character-sketch continued exerting more and more influence upon the drama as time went on. After Jonson's death the drama rapidly declined, while with equal rapidity the character-sketch became the most prolific literary form of the seventeenth century.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, its popularity continued even into the following century. During all this time its influence upon the drama is observable. Jonson's experiment in adapting the Greek character-sketch to dramatic treatment was repeated by later dramatists, who used the English character-sketch in the same way. Thus Goldsmith, to mention but a single instance, made one of Doctor Jonson's character-sketches<sup>41</sup> the basis of the character of *Croaker* in his *Good-Natured Man* (acted 1768).<sup>42</sup>

It is impossible, within the limits of this article, to speak further concerning the significance of the influence exerted upon Ben Jonson

39 Johann Caspar Lavater, founder of the pseudo-science of Physiognomy, and author of the *Physiognomische Fragmente* (1775-78). The popularity in the eighteenth century of such books as this of Lavater was probably due, at least in part, to the interest in types of character aroused in the preceding century by such phrenological character-books as *A Brief Discourse Concerning the Different Wits of Men* by Walter Charleton, 1669.

40 The *Ethical Characters* of Theophrastus, popularized by Casaubon's Latin translation in 1592, furnished a model of which English writers were not slow to avail themselves. I find titles of over one hundred and fifty character-books published within the century.

41 This was *Suspirius, the human Screech-owl*, a character-sketch which appeared in the *Rambler* for October 9th, 1750.

42 In the *Life of Jonson*, chapter xvii, Boswell says that the Doctor pronounced *The Good-Natured Man*

"to be the best comedy that had appeared since the *Provoked Husband*, and declared that there had not been of late any such character exhibited on the stage as that of *Croaker*. I observed, Boswell adds, it was the *Suspirius* of his *Rambler*. He said Goldsmith had owned he had borrowed it from thence."

by the Greek character-sketch. If it has been pointed out with sufficient clearness that such an influence actually was exerted, the purpose of the writer has been attained.

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### JOSEPH TEXTE.<sup>1</sup>

PROBABLY from no other young author was France expecting so much as from J. Texte. Within the last few years of his life he had become known as the leading authority in France on outside literary relations. It is true, M. Texte was the pupil of M. Brunetière, but far excelled his master, by concentrating all his forces upon one study, comparative literature.

Joseph Texte was born in Paris in 1865, and belonged to one of the best families; his father was professor of history in the Collège Rollin and author of a *Histoire Moderne*; he died early, leaving young Texte and his mother alone, a sister having died shortly before. The young boy studied at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, taking the Prix d'Honneur de rhétorique, and in 1883 was admitted to the École Normale. He was of a most amiable and kind disposition, and soon won the respect of his teachers and his associates. He became especially known through his exceptionally strong moral character, a trait noticeable in all his writings through that earnestness of purpose, high moral tone and seriousness, not always characteristic of the modern French writers. Texte was an incessant worker and soon undermined his health. His judgments were always accurate and conservative, with possibly one exception; in his study of Elizabeth Browning he ventures to proclaim *Aurora Leigh* the great poem of the century; this is one of the few subjects in which he lost himself completely, forgetting his role of critic. In 1886, having failed à l'*agrégation des lettres*, he was sent to the Lycée de Rochefort-sur-Mer. Discouraged and in despair he found great consolation in his teachers, MM. Perrot

<sup>1</sup> The writer wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to Mme. J. Texte and M. René Durand, maître de conférence à l'École Normale Supérieure, for information otherwise unobtainable.